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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 002022

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/27/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)  
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT DETERMINED TO STOP ATTACKS, BUT  
COMMITTED TO PEACE

REF: A. MANILA 1997 (GOVERNMENT PURSUES NEW PEACE  
PROCESS STRATEGY)  
[1](#)B. MANILA 1962 (NEW CLASHES IN MINDANAO ARMY REACTS  
QUICKLY BUT WITH RESTRAINT)  
[1](#)C. MANILA 1940 (ARMED FORCES CHIEF DISCUSSES  
MINDANAO CLASHES)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. At a meeting at Malacanang Palace August 27, President Gloria Arroyo underscored to Ambassador the Philippine government's commitment to the peace process, but made it clear that a stable security situation was a prerequisite to returning to peace talks with Muslim insurgents. Citing the rapid success of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in taking over camps belonging to Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) commanders who carried out unprovoked attacks on Christian communities in central Mindanao, she expressed hope that continued progress in pacifying these elements would soon allow the government to resume efforts to hammer out a comprehensive agreement with the MILF. Reflecting on rising tensions in Mindanao between Christian and Muslim communities, the President stated the need for assistance to be provided to all communities, irrespective of religion. She underscored her belief that the international community had a role to play in laying the groundwork for a peace agreement, both in maintaining contact with Muslim communities in Mindanao as well as providing assistance that would help make a peace deal more viable.

[1](#)2. (C) SUMMARY CONTINUED. In a separate meeting August 27 with the Ambassador, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro stressed that President Arroyo remained committed to the peace process, but said that it was vital first to contain the brutal attacks by Muslim insurgents in Mindanao in recent weeks (ref b). Teodoro opined that the Supreme Court's recent temporary restraining order that stopped the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) on territory had been highly politicized, and characterized the situation as an attempt by opportunistic opposition politicians to further diminish the President's authority, and strengthen their own political standing. He dismissed out of hand any suggestion that the U.S. bore responsibility for the stalled peace process, complaining that opposition politicians were simply "playing politics." While lamenting the loss of an AFP C-130 airplane that crashed into the ocean August 25, he praised the performance of the AFP in clashes in Mindanao. Teodoro thanked the Ambassador for crucial U.S. development assistance in Mindanao, as well as for humanitarian aid during a recent typhoon, noting that the Philippine government's efforts were currently focused on the fighting in Mindanao and, should another natural disaster strike, the

government would be hard-pressed to find additional resources to respond. END SUMMARY.

#### REMOVING OBSTACLES TO PEACE

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13. (C) During a meeting at Malacanang Palace August 27 on the occasion of Peace Corps Director Ronald Tschetter's visit to the Philippines (septel), President Gloria Arroyo commented forcefully about the situation in Mindanao. She voiced the hope that the Philippine government would be able to remove all obstacles to peace in Mindanao, including those rogue Moro Islamic Liberation Front commanders she believed had sabotaged the peace process through unprovoked attacks on Christian communities. She stated that, although resistance had been fierce, Armed Forces of the Philippines soldiers had taken over rogue MILF camps, and she hoped the most serious fighting was over. Reflecting on the increasingly tense situation between Christians and Muslims in parts of central Mindanao, President Arroyo reiterated the importance of international support -- particularly U.S. assistance -- to the success of the peace process, as well as livelihood assistance for all the people of Mindanao. The President noted the importance of aid to Muslim communities but also stressed that the international community should help Christians as well. This was especially important so all communities in Mindanao felt included and had a stake in the future of the peace process.

#### "PLAYING POLITICS" WITH THE PEACE PROCESS

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14. (C) In a private breakfast with Ambassador August 27, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro stressed that the President was "absolutely" committed to the peace process, even as the government continued to work on a way forward. Sounding a familiar theme, he observed that the President had tasked him with creating stable security conditions that could allow resumption of negotiations with the MILF. He assessed that it could be months before the security situation stabilized, and hoped that by the end of the year the parties would be able to re-engage in a peace process. Teodoro expressed his view that, in the end, all problems were Manila-centered and the peace process was no exception. In his view, opposition to the peace process was anti-Arroyo sentiment masquerading as concern about the stalled agreement on territory. He railed against politicians who had publicly come out against the MOA, not because of a genuine interest in the peace process, but to further their personal political agendas. Teodoro vented his frustration against those he thought had undermined the peace process and fomented violence in Mindanao for political gain. "They have blood on their hands," he commented bitterly.

15. (C) Teodoro cited Senator Manuel Roxas as one of several politicians with presidential aspirations who severely criticized the MOA both to hurt President Arroyo and to further their presidential aspirations. According to Teodoro, Roxas had recently fallen in the polls and saw the MOA as a vehicle to regain public stature. Similarly, he cited rumors that Supreme Court Chief Justice Renato Puno was contemplating a run at the presidency, perhaps influencing the Supreme Court's decision to issue the temporary restraining order against the signing of the MOA. Teodoro, a U.S.-trained lawyer and himself mooted as a possible candidate in 2010, noted that other players also had personal motives for opposing the MOA, including North Cotabato Vice Governor Manny Pinol, whose interest in fighting the MOA was simply to return to the public eye and regain his province's governorship. Teodoro admitted that he personally thought the MOA was insufficient as written, but thought that it presented a good basis for further negotiation.

MILF LEADERSHIP MISHANDLED SITUATION

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16. (C) Teodoro noted that the MILF leadership had exacerbated an already difficult situation by not immediately condemning the actions of rogue elements. Teodoro questioned MILF Chairman Murad Ebrahim's claim that the MILF could not control rogue MILF forces and voiced concerns whether the government could continue to negotiate with him. Teodoro said it was clear that the MILF had leadership problems, as Murad was struggling to balance his own forces. However, given MILF actions, Teodoro said the government had no other option but to respond with military force. Teodoro put blame on the Malaysian facilitators, whom he said neither understood the Philippine people, nor how they work. Commenting on press articles stating that the MILF should be designated a terrorist organization, Teodoro said the commentary represented a thinly veiled attack on the President, as terrorist designation would allow the opposition to claim the President had been negotiating with terrorists, providing them the basis for their perennial impeachment complaints. Teodoro hoped the U.S. would refrain from designating the MILF as a terrorist organization, noting it would be rather inappropriate for the U.S. to designate as terrorist a group that threatens the Philippines more than it does the U.S. He said he was in favor of the rule of law and filing charges against MILF elements that violate the law, but saw no value in simply labeling them as terrorist. Teodoro underscored that the government abhorred violence, but had been left no alternative but to mount military operations by MILF actions. He praised AFP Chief Alexander Yano for the fine job he was doing in stabilizing the situation but noted that Yano, while an able soldier, needed to sharpen his political skills.

AMBASSADOR WARNS AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES  
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17. (C) The Ambassador stressed the potential for human rights abuses of captured MILF insurgents as the AFP continues to take over MILF camps. She emphasized the need to treat detainees humanely, noting the possible impact on assistance

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programs. The Ambassador noted the importance of ensuring progress in the arrest, prosecution, and conviction in outstanding cases of extrajudicial killings, pointing out that U.S. Congressional concerns reflected the views of the large Philippine community in the U.S. that closely followed the issue. While noting his view that the Philippines was singled out unfairly for criticism in the region, Teodoro pledged to keep a careful watch on both human rights concerns. The Ambassador also underscored the importance of investigating all violent episodes during the last several weeks of confrontations, whether committed by Christians or Muslims. Teodoro acknowledged the Ambassador's concerns, and voiced his own concern that Christians had become more militant, significantly raising the potential for more violence. Teodoro concluded by thanking the Ambassador for crucial U.S. development assistance in Mindanao, as well as for humanitarian assistance during Typhoon Frank. Teodoro noted that the Philippine government's efforts were currently focused on Mindanao and, should a natural disaster strike, the government might be hard-pressed to respond.

KEEPING THE DIPLOMATIC CORPS INFORMED  
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18. (SBU) Key members of Arroyo's cabinet convened August 27 at the Department of Foreign Affairs to offer a joint briefing on recent violence in Mindanao and the status of the peace process to the diplomatic corps. Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo opened with a brief review of recent legal battles surrounding the draft Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA), after which Solicitor General Agnes Devanadera explained that, in light of recent MILF violence, the administration would voluntarily withdraw the MOA from

further consideration, and ask that the Supreme Court dismiss all pending petitions seeking judgments of its unconstitutionality. Peace Process Presidential Advisor Hermogenes Esperon emphasized that the administration's immediate priority was to renew the mandate of the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) that oversees the MILF ceasefire; the terms of reference for the team are set to expire August 31. Esperon said an entirely new process of peace consultations would soon begin involving all stakeholders, including Christian leaders in Mindanao, and that would take into account public sentiment.

COMMENT

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19. (C) Both President Arroyo and Secretary Teodoro appeared sincere in saying they are working hard to avoid broader conflict in Mindanao as the AFP moves to stop rogue MILF elements. Their key goal is to firmly reestablish stability, creating the conditions to return to serious negotiations on a comprehensive peace deal. While top government leaders reasserted their intention to reach out to grassroots communities, NGOs, and local political leaders in an effort to build consensus for an acceptable peace deal, it is also evident that they have not yet mapped out a clear strategy for achieving that goal and it will take a few more weeks until the AFP military efforts are wrapped up before they can undertake outreach efforts. One thing that rings true is that concerns about the MOA have as much to do with Manila politics -- particularly as the 2010 presidential election approaches and opposition members search for a basis to launch another impeachment attempt against President Arroyo -- as they do with any legitimate concerns about the legality or advisability of the territorial agreement. While overt accusations of U.S. opportunism in supporting the MOA have largely subsided, Post will continue to use every opportunity with the press, during public events, and in private meetings with government officials to assure the Philippine public that U.S. goals remain the same: helping the Philippine people create a peaceful and secure Mindanao that contributes to the overall prosperity of the Philippines.

KENNEY